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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 000198

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/25/2017
TAGS: PGOV PREL BL PINR
SUBJECT: THE OPPOSITION WINS THE SENATE PRESIDENCY

REF: LA PAZ 167

Classified By: Political-Economic Counselor Andrew Erickson for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On January 24, after five days of intense negotiations and four rounds of voting, National Unity (UN) Senator Jose Villavicencio was elected president of the senate for the 2007 session, replacing Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) Senator Santos Ramirez. The three opposition parties successfully united to form a majority and wrest control of the senate from the MAS (Reftel). Villavicencio told Emboff that he will quickly determine committee memberships and looks forward to a close working relationship with the Embassy. End Summary

THE SENATE PRESIDENCY

¶2. (U) The Bolivian senate is made up of twenty-seven members. Currently Podemos has thirteen senators, MAS twelve, and UN and MNR one each. MAS Senator Santos Ramirez was president of the senate for the 2006 session and had been the MAS candidate for re-election. After drawn out negotiations and four rounds of voting in five days, UN Senator Jose Villavicencio was elected president for the 2007 session by a vote of fourteen to twelve. Podemos Senator Carlos Borth was elected vice-president. Both Santos Ramirez and President Morales criticized the vote as the re-emergence of the "neoliberal right."

¶3. (U) In addition to wresting control of the upper house from the MAS, Villavicencio's presidency creates other complications for the GOB. The president of the senate is third in line for succession, after President Morales and Vice President Garcia Linera. Also, the Bolivian constitution stipulates that when the president is out of the country, the next in line is designated acting president. If

both Morales and Garcia Linera were abroad at the same time, Villavicencio would become acting president. It should be noted, however, that control of the senate does not guarantee the opposition the ability to block all legislature (due to complex rules of originating chamber).

¶4. (C) Villavicencio told Emboff January 25 that his first order of business is determining senate committee memberships. Villavicencio commented that there "are no strings attached" to his presidency and said the opposition had united to defend democracy, a two-thirds vote in the constituent assembly, and respect for the separation of power and independent institutions. Villavicencio added that he appreciates his good relationship with the Embassy and looks forward to working closely with the USG.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) It appears that the opposition has been able to put aside its differences and form a united front. As one UN congressman commented in a recent meeting with the Ambassador, "if we (the opposition) are able to gain control of the senate, we will have done in eight months what has taken the Venezuelan opposition eight years to accomplish." Podemos, UN, and MNR have expressed their intention to continue this cooperation in the constituent assembly. Given the personalities and ambitions of the various party leaders, however, it is not clear that this newfound spirit of cooperation will last. As noted, while control of the senate has strengthened the opposition, it does not give it complete blocking power over the MAS. End comment.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

¶6. (C) Jose Sebastian Villavicencio Amuruz is forty-nine years old and is from Cobija, Pando. He is divorced and the father of two. He lives with his common-law wife Gedaly Yukiko Ishiuchi Hafat. His business interests include a ceramics factory, cattle, and a hotel, all in Pando. Villavicencio is a close Embassy contact.

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